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ATG Interviews Barbara Haber

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ATG Interviews Barbara Haber

Curator, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University

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by John Riley (Sales Director, Eastern Book Company) <jdriley@attbi.com>

Editor's Note: *Barbara Haber is Curator of books at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. She has developed a major culinary collection of over 16,000 cookbooks and books on food history. For her many contributions to the study of food, she was elected to the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who in American Food and Beverages and named M.F.K. Fisher Award winner by Les Dames d'Escoffier. Haber is co-author of the Culinary History chapter in the Cambridge World History of Food and is senior advisory editor for Oxford University Press's Encyclopedia of American Food. She holds a bachelor degree from University of Wisconsin, a master's in literature from University of Chicago, and an MLS from Simmons. She lives in Winchester, Mass.*

*She has just published **From Hardtack to Homefries An Uncommon History of American Cooks and Meals** (The Free Press \$25.00 ISBN 0-684-84217-3) The book is an exploration of the influence food has had on various cultures in America in the 19th and 20th centuries. To quote again "Barbara is a writer and storyteller who understands how food has shaped history as much as history has shaped food." The book also contains an excellent annotated bibliography of seminal cookbooks and historical sources. — JR*

ATG: *Barbara, before we get started, could you tell us a little about your library and its collections? Genesis of collection? Who uses it? What is your role?*

BH: About the library and its collections: The Schlesinger Library was founded in 1943 as a social history library collecting on the subject of American women. Its original focus in the beginning was to collect unpublished sources so that the papers of individual women were acquired as well as women's organizations. For the 19th century we have the papers of many suffragists and for the 20th century, Betty Friedan, Andrea Dworkin and the papers of Julia Child and M.F.K. Fisher. From the start, the library had some cookbooks amongst its biographies and histories, for it was always apparent that cookbooks contain women's history.

I have been at this library for my whole career. I came right after library school, thinking I would stay a year or two, but then found I was in on the ground floor of the new field of women's history when it developed in around 1970. I was fascinated to see new



Barbara Haber
Photographed by Peter Urban
From Hardtack to Homefries, Free Press

areas of knowledge opening up and the Schlesinger Library became essential to scholarship because we had documents and collections of books on women at a time when such things were rare. Because I had already witnessed a new field developing, I was able to see the same signs when food history began taking off about ten years ago.

The library is open to the public, free of charge, and we get visitors from all over the world. **Nancy Cott**, the library's new director, began using the library when she was a graduate student. So many other American historians writing women's history use the collection: **Alice Kessler Harris**, **Joyce Antler**, **Susan Ware**, to name a few. We also are visited by cooking school students as well as such chefs as **Lydia Shire** and **Chris Schlesinger**.

My role as curator of books is to make sure that we are collecting appropriately today so that when researchers come in 20 to 50 years from now they will find printed materials that reflect the period. For this reason, I buy lots of popular material, psychobabble that reflects issues between men and women: *Women Who Love Men Who Hate Women*, that sort of thing. I also collect certain kinds of fiction that usually are not part of research collections, detective fiction with female protagonists, for instance. It used to be that women in such books were only helpmates and never the main solver of crimes. (They were **Watson** while some man was **Sherlock Holmes**.) I made the decision to start collecting these kinds of things some years ago when a scholar was looking for a 19th century novel that had been a best-seller. Since the book was never taught in college

courses, it had never entered university libraries, and when the book lost its popularity, public libraries discarded it. As a result, it became scarce. Plenty of review were available, since libraries collect and preserve periodical literature, so the poor scholar had plenty of reviews in hand, but could not find books. I learned a lesson from that and decided to collect popular books with women's themes, the violence issues, for instance.

ATG: *Over the past 15 years you have become increasingly active in the culinary history field. Tell us about how you became interested in culinary history and some of the projects you have worked on.*

BH: Food history has always interested me. I had my own collection of cookbooks which I really read and was always aware of the depth of information available in cookbooks. I was one of the charter members of the **Culinary Historians of Boston** which used to meet regularly in the library, and had friends who shared my interest. In 1990, we founded the **Radcliffe Culinary Friends** when it was apparent that people who had never before used the library were coming because of our cookbook collection. **Julia Child**, who had already given us her personal papers, gave us her cookbooks around that time. From the beginning, our organization was popular. We do lots of programming, including a newsletter. Throughout the nineties, I had opportunities to test out some of the ideas that turn up in my book when I gave papers at conferences, many in various Mediterranean countries. The **Olive Oil Council** sponsored most of these, and I was assigned topics that allowed me to see if I could write about the foods of Spain, let's say, and at the same time write about women. The first talk I ever gave was for a panel on what people had eaten in 1492, the time of **Columbus's** crossing. My assignment was to write about the Jewish diet; other panelists were writing about Christian and Moslem food. What I discovered was an unpublished dissertation that covered the trial testimony against 111 women in Toledo, Spain, during the Inquisition who were accused of going back on their conversion and continued to practice as Jews. At a time when male teachers and rabbis had fled, women were still passing on food customs to young members of their families. The testimonies were full of accusations about what these women were cooking and serving, so at the same time that I was able to tease out the exact dishes they ate, I also was able to make a point about women and food.

continued on page 42

Whether or not they had been sincere in their conversion, they still clung to their cultural customs and were passing down the culture. I believed from the first that women and food were connected in age-old ways and that important history could be unlocked by pursuing those themes.

ATG: *I really enjoyed reading your book and I feel that it breaks new ground in the field by linking social history with culinary history in a broader view of the subject. There is a theme of food as a way of connecting with the land and with other people that runs through the book. There is also a theme that shows how various cultures have used food as a means of celebration, especially in times of adversity. How did you come to write about this theme?*

BH: I had thrown myself into that first conference paper and subsequent ones, with the vague idea that someday I would write a book.

In finding my topics for the book, I read widely in areas that interested me. I held the conviction that any period of history could yield interesting stories and to prove this I went to the literature on the Civil War. No period has been more closely mined, yet I was able to say something about women's roles as nurses in both the North and the South where they worked in diet kitchens. The medical establishment believed that whiskey held healing properties, so barrels of whiskey were part of the supplies, but male staff members tried to steal them. One Southern nurse, **Phoebe Pember**, had to guard them with a shotgun. Not our usual sense of what nursing is all about.

ATG: *What are some of your favorite anecdotes from the book?*

BH: I very much enjoyed writing about **Henrietta Nesbitt**, who had been the White House housekeeper during the FDR administration. She was notorious for serving bad food and I was eager to get to the bottom of what seemed to me a good story. Why was she allowed to be in charge in spite of great criticism, especially from the president. The key to the mystery turned out to be the friendship she had with **Eleanor Roosevelt** who had given **Mrs. Nesbitt** a job when she needed it and in return received great loyalty.

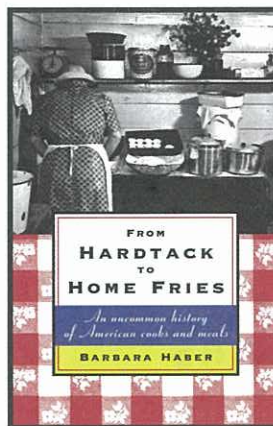
ATG: *You use food history to explore neglected areas of women's history and ethnic history. Could you tell us more about your interest in this field?*

BH: My interest in writing about such periods of our history is to dignify food history and especially to bring to light the importance of cookbooks as social documents. I use them throughout my book.

ATG: *Have we finally moved beyond the academic taboo of talking about women's history and food history as linked in a special way?*

BH: Here comes your academic question. The way I see it, women, kitchens and cookbooks have traditionally been seen as trivial and unimportant. Certainly male historians have always thought so and historians of women picked up on that prejudice in the interest of bringing to light the "important" accomplishments of women. Serious writing about women and food focused on eating disorders, the self-abuse women would inflict on themselves because of their frustrations over social disadvantages. Only recently have feminists been making the connections between women and food in a positive way. And, the academy is beginning to recognize the important place of food in history. What has not yet happened is an appropriate awareness that food is a large, interdisciplinary subject that requires nontraditional research. I am waiting for scholars to understand the importance of cookbooks.

ATG: *Culinary history cuts across so many fields: health, social history, art, agriculture, economics, entertainment. How do you draw the limit as to what to collect?*



BH: As to what to collect. We are focused on cookbooks and new scholarship on the history of food. As our resources expand, I also am buying out-of-print books on the history of agriculture, works in archaeology and other such things, not with the intention of building a comprehensive collection, but in bringing in some classics that contain great notes and bibliographies so that scholars get some good help if they need to use other libraries to pursue various interdisciplinary topics.

ATG: *Why do you think there has been such an explosion of interest in food and food history in the last few years?*

BH: Why is this surge of interest happening now? I can perhaps best speak for women's history by pointing out that historians of women have been saying right along that women are not one big monolithic group but have important demographic and cultural differences. People are beginning to recognize that by tracing foodways, one can get to the heart of these differences.

continued on page 43

2002 Charleston Conference - Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition

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ATG: Are more universities and libraries collecting culinary history?

BH: Many of the other subject specialists in the Harvard library system are now collecting cookbooks. Many have standing orders with foreign publishers and instead of discarding cookbooks are now adding them to their collections.

ATG: How many books are published in this field every year? Journals? Electronic databases available?

BH: No one really knows how many cookbooks are published each year because so many are published by small groups around the country as fundraisers (community cookbooks). I don't have any other quantitative information.

ATG: Finally, we all have favorite foods, our madeleines: what are yours?

BH: My favorites: Anything with peanuts. Wonderful crusty Italian breads, with olive-oil. I have experienced enough different oils so that I can taste the differences between those coming from Tuscany and those from Provence. I love the green grassy ones as well as the more mellow buttery ones and try to match them up to appropriate dishes. 

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From the Reference Desk

Column Editor: **Tom Gilson** (Head, Reference Services, College of Charleston) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

At first glance, some reference titles seem narrowly focused. Arguably, **Routledge's, The Papacy: An Encyclopedia** (2002, 0415922283, \$425) might be viewed as such a work. But on closer examination it is obvious that the impact of the Roman Catholic Church on Western history gives a study of the Papacy far reaching relevance. In short, this encyclopedia has broader application.

This three-volume work is an updated English language version of the *Dictionnaire historique de la papauté* edited by **Philippe Levillain** and first published by **Librairie Athene Fayard**. The majority of this English language set is a direct translation of the initial 1994 French edition, but the content has been updated to include events since then. Naturally, the *Encyclopedia* includes biographical sketches of the popes but in addition, there are involved discussions of rituals, doctrines, historical events, religious orders, canon law and the politics, as well as the inner workings, of the Vatican.

The scholarship that went into this set is unquestioned. Editor **Philippe Levillain** gathered well over 200 scholars, mostly European, to contribute approximately 780 articles to the original edition. They, along with a team of translators and reviewers guided by **John W. O'Malley, S.J.** have created a

work that sets the standard for a reference on this topic. The articles are clear, read well and are full of relevant information. However, there is one caveat. While the bibliographies have been supplemented with English language sources, the majority of citations are in French and that will limit their usefulness for many undergraduates.

Nonetheless, *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia* is the most comprehensive and scholarly reference work treating this subject. There are useful single volume works like **J. N. D. Kelly's Oxford dictionary of Popes** (1989, 0192820850, \$14.95) and **Richard P. McBrien's Lives of the Popes** (1997, 0060653035, \$29.50). But those titles may now be more appropriate for circulating collections. For those libraries that can afford it, *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia* will become the reference source of choice, and merits serious consideration from most academic libraries, as well as larger public libraries. For many libraries that focus on religious studies, this encyclopedia may be seen as essential.

ABC-CLIO has added to their *American Family* series of reference books with *Boyhood in America: an Encyclopedia*. (2001,

1576072150, \$185). Defining boyhood "from birth through the teenage years until about the age of twenty," this 2-volume set treats over 150 diverse topics in articles ranging from 2-4 pages in length. Many of the articles deal with specific activities and hobbies while others cover evolving roles and family relationships, as well as individual and group behavior. There are also entries on the boyhoods of Americans representative of their time and place in society. Resulting articles include those on sports like baseball and ice hockey as well as activities as diverse as drag racing and books and reading. In addition, there are articles on issues and behaviors as diverse as competition, divorce, emotions, gangs, poverty, suicide and boyhood sexuality. Readers will find that one of the main benefits of this set is the historical perspective given by these articles. There is an obvious attempt to show the evolution of the boyhood experience in America from colonial times to the present. But, some of the articles stretch to find relevance. For example, the observations expressed in the articles on schoolbooks, amusement parks, and Sunday schools, while interesting, struggle to find the direct relationship to boyhood that many of the other articles have. Nonetheless, this is a

continued on page 46